Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution

Dr Sudhir Hazareesingh

17 October 2022

It is hard to imagine a more extraordinary life than that of Toussaint Louverture. Born in 1743 to slave parents on the Bréda sugar plantation on the French colony of Saint Domingue (the "pearl of the Caribbean"), his family belonged to its owner, an aristocrat called Count Noé. In keeping with the conventions of the time, he was named after his master's property: so he was first known as Toussaint Bréda. Yet this unassuming young slave – nicknamed "Fatras-Bâton" (clumsy stick) because of his physical frailness -- went on to become the leader of a revolution which captured the public imagination across Europe and the Americas. Hailed for his remarkable prowess on the battlefield, Toussaint adopted the surname "Louverture" in 1793: a token of his uncanny ability to find a pathway to success even against insuperable odds, and of his unshakeable conviction that he could open the road to his people's emancipation from servitude. He would live up to expectation in both of these respects, and also become the first modern symbol of the universal struggle for racial equality.

It was the French Revolution which initially brought Toussaint to the limelight. In 1791, news of the proclamation of the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity in France provoked a slave rebellion in Saint Domingue. Toussaint initially allied himself with rebels siding with Spanish forces, winning a string of spectacular victories in the districts of Marmelade, Plaisance, Gonaïves, Gros Morne, and the Artibonite valley. He rallied the French cause in the colony after the abolition of slavery by the Jacobin government in 1794, rising to the rank of General in the French Revolutionary army. As from October 1796, he became the commander of French military forces at Saint Domingue. He was a brilliant military strategist, surrounding himself with talented officers who became local legends: his chief of staff General Pierre Agé, his brother Paul Louverture, his nephew Charles Belair, and the future rulers of Haiti Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe. Toussaint masterminded a campaign which contained the British presence on the island, and eventually negotiated their withdrawal in 1798 on the basis of a treaty signed with the British General Thomas Maitland (the British were so keen to secure his support that they offered to crown him "King of Saint Domingue"). He later consolidated his territorial position by defeating a rebellion by his southern rival, General André Rigaud, and laying claim in 1801 to Santo Domingo, the eastern part of the island under Spanish control.

Toussaint was also a consummate political tactician. By the late 1790s, while preserving the legal fiction that Saint Domingue was a French territory, he became the undisputed political leader of the colony. His military headquarters in the Gonaïves became the acknowledged seat of power, where Toussaint graciously granted audiences to admiring soldiers and officers, concerned planters, disgruntled emigrés, louche traders, scheming captains of American ships, and impoverished widows. French administrators who were successively sent from Paris to undermine his authority were sidelined, and eventually driven out of the island, while Toussaint presided over an efficient administration which restored civil order and economic prosperity. He reconstructed the inhabitations which were destroyed during the years of fighting, built roads and schools, and promoted the return of former royalist planters whose properties had been sequestered by the Republican authorities; among the plantations he restored was one which belonged to Josephine de Beauharnais, the wife of a rising French political star named Napoleon Bonaparte. The latter described Toussaint as a "great man" who had "served France with eminence and distinction". Toussaint was acclaimed by all sections of the population, and when he entered Port-au-Prince in 1798 he was received as a veritable sovereign, with the religious and civil authorities lining up the streets to greet him. A medal bearing his effigy

was minted, bearing the slogan “After God, It is Toussaint”.

In July 1801 the providential hero proclaimed a new Constitution which named him governor for life. This assertion of power placed him on a collision course with Napoleon, who had by now attained the eminent status of First Consul. Concerned that Toussaint would not be willing blindly to serve his interests in Saint Domingue (in particular, to countenance the restoration of slavery), Bonaparte despatched an expeditionary force under General Leclerc to reduce the flamboyant governor in early 1802. After several months of gallant combat, Toussaint agreed to an honourable surrender. But he was betrayed and captured by the French, and shipped across the Atlantic to the Fort de Joux in the Jura mountains, where he died in April 1803. Yet this victory proved to be pyrrhic, and a year later the French too had been driven out of Saint Domingue. Toussaint Louverture’s personal, political, and military accomplishments thus paved the way for the emergence of the independent state of Haiti, the world’s first postcolonial black State.

Toussaint was an exceptional figure, who ranked alongside the greatest political and military leaders to emerge in Europe and the Americas in the age of Revolution. He was arguably the most eminent of these *grands hommes*, because he combined all of their heroic qualities. He was all at once a founding father and lawgiver, in the tradition celebrated by Rousseau, and an implacable warrior, who could be utterly ruthless in the prosecution of his objectives. Toussaint was a national liberator, who achieved the philosopher Guillaume Thomas François Raynal’s prophecy that slavery would be overthrown by an “avenger of the new world”. He was in this respect a revolutionary, who ardently embraced the 1789 revolution’s principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, and took them to their logical conclusion. But he was also a sage, known by his compatriots as “le vieux” because of his belief in the virtues of education and reason, and his frequent appeal to the ideals of toleration and forgiveness. He surrounded himself with roses in his apartments, and carried them in his hand.

Toussaint was a bold leader who commanded the admiration of his supporters, and the respect of many of his adversaries. A 19th-century French memoir by Hippolyte de Saint-Anthoine, based on conversations with men who had lived under Toussaint’s rule in Saint Domingue, noted that “such was his superiority to those around him that the sense of adulation he enjoys, and the submission to his authority, are tantamount to fanaticism”. The French General Pamphile de Lacroix, a member of the expeditionary force sent by Napoleon, likewise observed that Toussaint’s soldiers “regarded him as an extraordinary being, and the agricultural workers bowed to him as though in presence of a divinity”. Another French historian, Antoine Métral, was so awed by Toussaint’s charisma that he described him as someone who “could fly in the air”.

This magical aura was of course carefully cultivated: like Napoleon, with whom he shared many qualities (and a few shortcomings), Toussaint had an unwavering faith in his personal calling: he once claimed that he had “a divine portent” that he was “destined for great things”. He also knew how to exploit oral and written propaganda to his advantage. Like the *petit caporal*, Toussaint too was uncommonly brave and seemed blessed with a charmed life on the battlefield. He had dozens of horses killed under him, and was seriously wounded in battle seventeen times; he lost most of his front teeth when a cannonball exploded near him (hence the claim by some that “Louverture” referred to the gaping hole in his mouth). But there much more to his leadership than mere personal magnetism and military gallantry. Toussaint was a complex figure, steeped in the values of the Enlightenment but also shaped by his own African heritage, and deeply immersed in the creole culture of Saint Domingue. In his youth he learnt the Ewe-Fon language of his Arada ancestors, and he routinely employed Haitian Kreyòl when haranguing his soldiers and addressing himself to agricultural workers in the sugar and coffee plantations. He first joined the 1791 slave rebellion not as a combatant but as a physician – a *docteur feuilles* who could heal the wounded by drawing on his knowledge of the medicinal properties of local plants and herbs.

Toussaint Louverture thus navigated a creative path across three worlds, the European, the Caribbean, and the African. This eclectic, cosmopolitan heritage was one of the keys to his charismatic appeal. It also helps explain the striking epithets with which he was adorned. He was variously described as the centaur of the savannah (a tribute to his horsemanship; his white steed Bel Argent was integral to his myth), the father of the blacks, the black Spartacus, the black son of the French Revolution, the black George Washington, the Bonaparte of the Caribbean, the African hero, and (less flatteringly) the Robespierre of Saint Domingue. From Virginia and Louisiana to Jamaica, Cuba and Brazil, slaves cherished him as a subversive, amusing, and empowering figure, and sang songs in his honour. Even liberal opinion in England was moved by the sight of such an uncommon hero: an article in the *London Gazette* in 1798 hailed Toussaint as a “Negro King”, a proud representative of the “Black race whom the Christian world to their infamy have been

accustomed to degrade".

Warrior, statesman, national liberator, sage, revolutionary, martyr, and myth: a figure with such extraordinary qualities is an obvious candidate for closer individual study. Yet Toussaint poses considerable challenges to the biographer. Few reliable sources are available about his life before he became a public figure, and so the first five decades of his existence are largely shrouded in darkness. His iconic stature makes it difficult at times to separate myth from reality, all the more so that he himself carefully selected the information he chose to impart to his different audiences. His most recent biographer, the American novelist Madison Smartt Bell, ended his book with this melancholic observation: "famously elusive in real life, Toussaint is no less elusive to the historian and biographer".

What further complicates things for the historian is that Toussaint remained a highly secretive figure throughout his life. His *Mémoires*, written when he was imprisoned in the Fort de Joux, were a dignified (and ultimately vain) attempt to explain and justify his actions to his captor Bonaparte. They were not concerned with providing a coherent narrative of his life, or shedding light on hitherto unknown aspects of his past. This is unfortunate, as many key episodes even in Toussaint's public career remain mysterious: from his precise role in the 1791 slave rebellion to the expulsion of his ally the French commissioner Sonthonax in 1797, not to mention his execution of his lieutenant (and nephew) Moïse in 1801. Historians still disagree vehemently about the reasons and even the timing of his decisive break with Spain, which led to his embracing the French revolutionary cause: four different dates, spread out between May and June 1794, have been suggested in the literature. The main reason for this kind of uncertainty is that Toussaint loved nothing more than to keep everyone guessing. Hence his widely-acknowledged capacity to appear in unexpected places, and also to disappear without trace – traits which were also noted by his adversaries. Here, again, is Lacroix, his frustration mingled with admiration: "no-one ever knew what he was doing, whether he was coming, or going; where he was travelling to, and whence he was coming".

He did not confide much about his strategic thinking -- even to his close entourage. The few men he really trusted, such as the Adjutant-General Augustin d'Hébécourt, whom he sent on a number of secret missions, left no written records. As one of Toussaint's admirers noted, "his principal resources lie in himself". From this premise of secretiveness, all sorts of fanciful conclusions have been drawn, especially by Toussaint's colonialist critics. A memoir written by a French visitor to Saint Domingue observed that "Toussaint could not stand the idea of subjecting himself to any authority, and even less to share it"; this critic predictably deduced that he was "ambitious and hypocritical". Like all powerful leaders, he was also believed to have amassed a large fortune, and the legend of Toussaint's "treasure" appears to have been swallowed even by Napoleon. Sent by the First Consul to interrogate him in his cell, General Caffarelli indelicately blurted out what had obviously become a common legend: "it is believed that you despatched six black men to hide your treasures in a safe location, and that when they returned, these six men were massacred"; there were also rumours of "six millions sent to Washington".

However there are excellent documentary sources on Toussaint. The reports of the various French civilian and military officials who dealt with him in Saint Domingue are invaluable, even --and indeed because -- of their prejudice against the man whose power and authority they resented, and who consistently outsmarted them. Yet even these biased accounts are often highly revealing of the fascination and fear which Toussaint could provoke, and the extraordinary reversal of the traditional social and racial hierarchy which he orchestrated in Saint Domingue. Here, for example, is the striking language used by General Kerverseau in 1797 as he acknowledged the helplessness of the French in their efforts to contain Toussaint: "we are like children who sing in the night when they are afraid, or travellers who accidentally stumble into a lion's den and try to tame the formidable creature by stroking it". In this context, one essential collection of material for understanding Toussaint's life and thought is his correspondence, both public and private. Although his written French was phonetic, he understood it perfectly, and only signed letters once he was absolutely happy with the final draft: in this sense, these documents are a faithful record of what he intended to say -- if not necessarily what he actually believed. A further measure of the importance of these letters is the secretive way in which they were put together: according to one of his main secretaries Pascal, Toussaint dictated separate parts of his important letters to different assistants, so that he would be the only one to know the full version.

At the height of his power he dictated "hundreds" of such letters a day, and "wore down his five secretaries" (Saint-Anthoine). Unfortunately, very little of this precious source material has been gathered in edited collections; the most important advance in this respect has been the republication of Toussaint's letters to

Etienne Laveaux, the French governor of Saint Domingue, and Toussaint's most fervent and steadfast French ally. The Laveaux letters provide an essential window into Toussaint's political thought between 1794 and 1798, and in particular his republican philosophy. They also offer invaluable insights into his mindset, and are the closest thing we have to hearing his voice directly: it is in these texts, for example, that we can immediately perceive his remarkable self-possession, his rich and sophisticated world view, and his favourite and singular idiomatic expressions (for example, the use of the word "frère"). More generally, Toussaint's letters are also revealing as to his social and moral values. For example, there is a 1799 letter in the collection held in the library at Nantes, addressed by Toussaint to his sons Isaac and Placide, who were being educated in Paris at the time. It provides powerful glimpses of his devotion to his children, and of his strong sense of family values. But the letter was also a reaffirmation, both to them and to himself, of the symbolic exemplarity of his name. In revolutionary times, there was no meaningful distinction between the public and private realms, as he reminded his sons: "everyone has their eyes fixed on you, and I expect you to redouble your efforts and your application in order not to disappoint my hopes".

The major repository of primary sources on late 18th-century Saint Domingue are in French public archives. This material has not been systematically exploited by Toussaint's biographers. These voluminous papers are disseminated in different locations: the French Ministry of Defence archives at Vincennes (which include Toussaint's military dossier: GDI series, file 7 YD 284, as well as 28 boxes on French military operations in Saint Domingue, B7 cartons 1-28). There are important collections on Saint Domingue at the Archives Nationales in Pierrefitte: AA 54 (pièces relatives à Saint Domingue); the AE and AF series, notably AF III 208, 209; 210 (colonies); AF IV 1213 (rapports du Ministre de la Marine); and F 2c 13 on the education of Toussaint's children. The manuscript department of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris holds the unpublished recollections of Toussaint's son Isaac, NAF 12409, which I have consulted: these papers contain many invaluable biographical details about Toussaint, and generally offer fascinating insights into his public and private life. Furthermore, there is a significant body of material on Saint Domingue at the French colonial archives at Aix-en-Province: more than a 100 folders in the CC9 series alone, including a large collection of proclamations and letters by Toussaint, and his correspondance with French officials in Saint Domingue: Laveaux, Sonthonax, Hédouville, Raimond, and Roume. There are also a number of Toussaint's letters in local archive collections in Bordeaux and in the municipal library of Nantes.

The rest of Toussaint's correspondence, which holds similar promise, lies scattered across private collections and public archives in the USA, Haiti, Jamaica, and Britain (in the Public Record Office and the British Library, as well as in the Maitland papers in the National Archives of Scotland in Edinburgh). Here too, there have already been telling discoveries, perhaps none more so than the letter recently uncovered in the Public Record Office. Dated 6 April 1799, it was sent by Count Noé, the former owner of the Bréda plantation where Toussaint had lived and worked for much of his early life. The hapless Count had now fallen on hard times, and had lost access to all his assets in Saint Domingue. He ended his letter by pleading with his former slave – now the ruler of the island – to help him financially. It is a measure of Toussaint's generosity of spirit that he responded favourably to this sollicitation, and sent funds to the man whose possessions once included all the members of his family. "Fortune" he wrote back "has changed my position, but it has not changed my heart".

Toussaint Louverture's life and values were deeply embedded in the classical republican heritage of the late Enlightenment. This lineage shines through in his political language and rhetoric. He often referred to Ancient Rome when he harangued his soldiers and officers, and he was intimately familiar with the military works of Vegetius and Caesar. A bust of the philosopher Raynal, the implacable critic of the barbarity of European colonialism, was prominently displayed in his residence, and he read (and cited) Machiavelli. Yet the way in which Toussaint has been represented by later generations of historians, and especially by his modern biographers, has increasingly distanced us from this heritage, thus obscuring one of the defining features of his character and personality.

This distortion was facilitated from the very outset by the instrumentalization of his memory. For much of the 19th century views on Toussaint were highly polarized, and he essentially became a vehicle for the propagation of conflicting accounts of the revolution in Saint Domingue. Many early French writings and testimonies, such as the works of Louis Dubroca and Charles-Yves Cousin d'Avallon, were written from the perspective of white French colonists. They were virulently hostile to the Haitian revolution, and this naturally prejudiced their view of Toussaint. The same was true of the first wave of historical works in 19th-century Haiti by authors such as Beaubrun Ardouin, Thomas Madiou, and Joseph Saint-Remy, who blamed Toussaint for fomenting a bitter civil war between blacks and mixed-race populations in the final years of the

18th century; they also accused Toussaint of allowing himself to be manipulated by the whites. He was thus presented as a tyrant, a hypocrite, and a political opportunist, and as a promoter of disharmony among his people.

Conversely, liberal and progressive writers in France mobilized Toussaint's memory in the opposite direction. He was celebrated as a romantic hero in a play by the poet Alphonse de Lamartine, and featured as an example to humanity in Auguste Comte's *Calendrier Positiviste*. The Bordeaux lawyer Thomas-Prosper Gragnon-Lacoste, who had close ties with Toussaint's family, and claimed to be the depository of its archives, published his hagiographical study of the "First of the Blacks" in 1877 (the "archives" seem however to have disappeared without trace). A decade later, the French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher brought out his *Vie de Toussaint Louverture*, which hailed him as a "truly superior spirit", and a man whose existence had "honoured the human race". Writing at a time when the Third Republic was launching its massive education programme, Schoelcher was especially sympathetic to Toussaint's commitment to education. At the same time he censured the Saint Domingue ruler for his despotism, and presented him as a "man of order", who was "conservative by nature". This intellectual synthesis between order and progress reflected the more cautious positivist orientation of French republicanism in the late 19th century, and its efforts to distance itself from the more radical aspects of its "revolutionary" past.

This reinvention of Toussaint is even more apparent in CLR James's *Black Jacobins*. First published in 1938, it was the first modern work on Toussaint, and rightly remains a classic. It drew on some archival records, and presented Toussaint as a creative and singular product of French revolutionary ideology -- hence the title of the book. James argued that the guiding thread of Toussaint's political career was his belief in equality, which drove his relentless opposition to slavery, and his refusal to allow his people to succumb again to enslavement, whether by the British, the Spanish or the French. But while James embraced Toussaint's republicanism, and brilliantly brought out the originality of the Haitian revolution, his Marxist approach also relativized, and in some respects denatured it. There is little understanding of the key role of fraternity in Toussaint's thought, and his leadership was seen to matter only to the extent that it was made possible by mass revolutionary mobilizations. And even though he acknowledged the importance of race in Toussaint's politics, James argued (in good orthodox Marxist fashion) that class was ultimately the more significant factor in explaining the course of the Haitian revolution. Framed as the product of world-historical forces, James's Toussaint was in this respect a paradoxically epiphenomenal figure -- all the more so that his "Jacobinism" was presented as an anticipation of Lenin's Bolshevism.

This progressive ideological reappropriation is even more emphatic in Aimé Césaire's *Toussaint Louverture. La Révolution francaise et le problème colonial* (1981), which presented him as "the first great anticolonial leader the world has seen". This was at one level incontestable, given the Haitian revolution's eventual trajectory towards independence. But Toussaint's contribution to this outcome remains contentious given that he explicitly did not seek to sever the links between Saint Domingue and France, and built close ties with many members of the white colonial elite during his rule. Indeed far from seeking to "destroy the system", as Césaire claimed somewhat imprudently, Toussaint consistently refused to introduce any reforms which would increase land ownership for black agricultural workers. Toussaint was in this sense still wrestling with the social and political contradictions of the colonial system. He faced difficult, and indeed impossible choices: empowering the former slaves and maintaining the economic prosperity of Saint Domingue; submitting to a France which remained wedded to colonialism, or pursuing a doomed path towards independence. These dilemmas led some postcolonialist writers to see Toussaint as a symbol of the "irrepressible illusiveness of colonial enlightenment" (David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 2004).

Just as subtly -- and sometimes not so subtly -- distorting have been the efforts in the historiography to "Caribbeanize" Toussaint. The classic work in this genre remains Horace Pauléus Sannon's three-volume biography, which was published in Port-au-Prince between 1920 and 1933. It is still the best single biography, written from a sympathetic but not uncritical perspective, and drawing extensively on his correspondance, proclamations, and administrative acts; Sannon presented Toussaint as one of the founders (along with Jean-Jacques Dessalines) of modern Haitian nationalism. It is a measure of the fragmentation of Toussaint's historiography that this book is not available in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Carolyn Fick's *Making of Haiti* (1990) and Laurent Dubois's *Avengers of the New World* (2004) are more recent works in the same broad tradition, but which dwell more on the social and cultural dimensions of the Haitian revolution; in this sense, they both have relatively little to say about Toussaint himself.

This emphasis on the "creole" aspects of the Haitian revolution has provided valuable insights into the deep roots of popular protest in Saint Domingue, and locating Toussaint's actions within Caribbean and African cultural traditions. Indeed voodoo culture was widespread in Saint Domingue, and historians have recently

uncovered the extent to which slave rebellions from the mid-18th century onwards were embedded in supernatural cults -- beginning with the *marron* slave rebel and voodoo sorcerer Macandal, who was executed in 1758 for promising to destroy the system of slavery in Saint Domingue. A report by a French general to the Minister of Navy in 1801 asserted that Toussaint was "respected by the Africans as a sort of Macandal", and there are numerous testimonies of Toussaint using soothsayers (one of them accurately predicted in 1802 that he would be betrayed by his closest lieutenant). From the late 1790s to this day, many in Haiti believe that Toussaint adopted the name "Louverture" in reference to a *lwa* (African spirit) called Legba, "the one who opens the gates".

This elision of Toussaint's Enlightenment heritage is even more marked in revisionist contemporary studies of Toussaint, which have sought to nuance (and in some cases, overturn) the positive appreciations of the Saint Domingue ruler in the progressive historiography. The alternative formulations offered by these revisionist historians have often been strikingly depreciative. Pierre Pluchon, Toussaint's principal French biographer, saw him as a Catholic traditionalist and a man of the ancien régime, who was in no way a "revolutionary" and merely sought to replace the white social and political hierarchy of Saint Domingue with a black one (there was manifestly an element of sour grapes in this presentation of Toussaint as a "black racist", as Pluchon was a staunch defender of French colonialism). Likewise Jacques de Cauna, in his *Toussaint Louverture, le grand précurseur* (Bordeaux, 2012), while conceding that Toussaint had prepared the ground for the liberation of Haiti from French colonial rule, argued that his life and career were interesting mainly as a historical anticipation of the despotism of post-colonial revolutionary elites in the 20th century.

In a similar vein, the Guadeloupean historian Louis Girard, at the end of his analysis of Toussaint's uses of French and Kreyol languages, came to the provocative conclusion that his preference for the former over the latter was evidence of an inferiority complex: he likened Toussaint's "shameful French" to that of "a man on the journey of upward social mobility". Girard has also suggested – without any real evidence – that Toussaint was embarrassed by his African ancestry. Yet Toussaint's fighters were largely recruited from African-born former slaves. And we also know, thanks to the testimony of his son Isaac, that one of Toussaint's oft-declared ambitions was to lead an Army from Saint Domingue to Africa so as to challenge, and eventually destroy the slave trade: hardly the language of a man who wanted to turn away from his heritage.

Although the debates have in some respects moved on from the 19th century, the historiography of Toussaint Louverture remains fundamentally divided, pitted between those who view him as a progressive idealist reformer and those who see him as an ambitious and scheming opportunist. Even among his admirers, there have been significant variations, from the symbol of rationalism and progressivism and advocate of Jacobin unity to the tragic romantic hero, and founding father of Haitian nationalism and global anticolonialism – not to mention his recent sightings in the confused zombie hinterland of postcolonialism. This, for example, is the somewhat mystifying formulation from the literary theorist Deborah Jenson (*Beyond the Slave Narrative*, 2011): "Toussaint expertly deployed an Enlightenment and sentimental rhetoric that veiled his challenge to hemispheric notions of race in transatlantic print culture even as he brought questions of universal human rights back to his own subjectivity, his own lived history, and implicitly, his own body".

Rather like the drawings and portraits of him, which do not resemble each other (and probably in no instance are true representations of what he looked like) Toussaint's image has become increasingly blurred, and I have tried in my biography to recover the uniqueness of this extraordinary figure. For this great man was all at once a prodigious warrior, a gifted French administrator, a cunning diplomat, a creole *petit planteur* from the Caribbean, an African notable, a devout Catholic, and a man who could be inspired by magical thinking. The Saint Domingue ruler's singularity was perhaps best captured by the poet Edouard Glissant in his play *Monsieur Toussaint* (first published in 1961), which highlighted the tensions in his hero's mindset between a forever shattered past and a future which had yet to be invented.

My account has shed new light on his life and legacy in a number of areas. First, close attention has been paid to the biographical implications of recent archival findings which have radically changed our picture of Toussaint's early years – "Toussaint before Louverture". These include the discovery that he was released from slavery by 1776 at the latest, and that before his union with his common-law wife Suzanne he was married to a freewoman named Cécile, with whom he had three children. A hitherto unknown connection between Toussaint and his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines has also come to light: it appears Dessalines was a former slave of his son-in-law. Notarial records also suggest that Toussaint owned some property and for a while leased a coffee plantation which included thirteen slaves. This new information is highly significant. It reveals that Toussaint belonged to a very small minority: according to official records,

there were only 32 black freedmen like him in Saint Domingue in 1788, out of a black population of half a million. New research has also clarified Toussaint's family ancestry, dispelling the legend that he was of royal blood but confirming that his African lineage was significant.

These archival findings have naturally led to renewed speculation about Toussaint's precise relationship with the pre-revolutionary colonial order. Some historians (including the recent biography by Bell) have even gone so far as to portray him as a wealthy planter who was well integrated into the white economic and social elite of Saint Domingue before the outbreak of the slave rebellion. However this image of Toussaint sipping *ponche* with the local aristocrats and mingling with the masonic elite at the Le Cap lodge does not survive serious scrunity, especially in light of Jean-Louis Donnadieu's detailed study of the Comte de Noé's Saint Domingue plantations (*Un grand seigneur et ses esclaves*, 2009); the records also show that his wife Suzanne and their children were still listed on the inventory of the Bréda plantation on the eve of the Revolution. Toussaint before 1789 remained a man of modest affluence, who still had a direct and close connection with the world of slavery (this explains, among other things, his extremely frugal eating habits throughout the 1790s). But his own capacity to escape from bondage also showed that he was a man of exceptional qualities. This, along with his distinguished African lineage, gave him a privileged stature among local slave communities – both the creoles (born in Saint Domingue) and the newly-arrived *bossales* from Africa. This new information puts in clearer perspective, for example, how he was able to prevent the burning of the Bréda plantation for a whole month at the outbreak of the slave rebellion in 1791.

This new information about Toussaint's early years also sheds a revealing light on his own later utterances about his past. In early 1799, he orchestrated the publication of an article about himself in the Parisian newspaper *Moniteur Universel*, which contained some information about his pre-revolutionary years on the Breda plantation. Speaking of his life "over the past twenty years", Toussaint portrayed himself as a man of order, religion, and virtue, faithful to his wife Suzanne, and entirely devoted to the cultivation of his *place*, the land allotment given to him by his masters. In this lyrical evocation, there was no mention of Enlightenment philosophy or the rights of man, or for that matter his first marriage. Toussaint presented himself as a contented slave, striking a careful balance between passivity (he did not contest the exploitative system upon which the plantation rested) and rebelliousness (he claimed to have rejected his masters' attempts to choose his bride). The latter claim was obviously fabricated, as we know that he was no longer a slave by the time he married Suzanne, and indeed had become a man of modestly independent means.

Historians have read this type of narrative merely as evidence of Toussaint's cynical desire to conceal his past. However this is far too narrow a view: the *Moniteur Universel* article also suggests a shrewd political understanding of how to present himself in the best possible light to his different constituencies. In concealing his early emancipation from slavery, Toussaint was manifestly playing to the (French) gallery, seeking to reassure an increasingly conservative bourgeois opinion in France that the abolition of slavery would not challenge the economic interests of the white landowners. We can also surmise that this sanitized account of his pre-revolutionary past was intended to serve a key political purpose back home: to reassure the large group of former slaves who were his most loyal and devoted supporters in Saint Domingue that he had enjoyed no special privileges under the old order, and that his suffering had been on par with theirs. His critics, past and present, might regard this as evidence of Toussaint "deviousness": it is surely better viewed as the political artistry of a leader who, at the height of his power, was able to command the allegiance of wealthy planters, the maritime bourgeoisie, the *petit blancs*, free people of colour, and slaves.

My biography further revisits some of the contentious issues which remain unresolved about Toussaint's rise to power. Among these are Toussaint's precise role in the 1791 uprising, views about which range from his prudent and opportunistic abstinence to his central but secretive role (the latter includes a further variant which has Toussaint acting as an agent of royalist counter-revolution). The precise chronology of Toussaint's conversion to the French revolutionary cause in 1794, and the extent to which this decision was influenced by the French Convention's abolition of slavery, are also matters of continuing debate, which I hope to settle conclusively through reference to the archives. The most important single issue about the later years of Toussaint's rule remains the vexed question of independence, and the extent to which the ruler of Saint Domingue believed it to be possible or even desirable. Haitian black nationalists and French colonialists consistently thought so, for opposing (but ultimately complementary) reasons. CLR James, in contrast, thought that Toussaint was committed to keeping Saint Domingue within the French ensemble, but as an autonomous self-governing entity.

The latter view was always more credible, as it was consistent with everything we already knew about Toussaint's sincere political and cultural empathy with France. Furthermore, his conception of his "blackness" was always grounded in an egalitarian rather than separatist philosophical anthropology: unlike his mixed-race rival André Rigaud, who wore a brown-haired wig with straight hair to conceal the fact that he was of African descent, Toussaint was not ashamed of his colour. This integrationist view of Toussaint has been reinforced by new research on his entourage, which has highlighted the closeness of his French affiliations, notably his connections with freemasons (including his brother Paul, and his greatest French allies, Governor Laveaux and General Vincent). Also worthy of note here is the significant presence of civilian and military personnel from Gascony around him: figures such as Julien Raimond, his secretaries Pascal and Dupuis, Borgella de Pensié (one of the main authors of the 1801 Constitution), and a cavalry colonel by the name of Dessalines (who bore no relation to the future Emperor of Haiti) who was described as "one of the most handsome military officers ever seen in Saint Domingue". Toussaint's feminine entourage in his later years, about which more information is also emerging, included a number of women with links to Gascony: among them was Madame de Lartigue, an "amiable creole" who was the widow of a French planter, and who was believed to have "held much sway" over Toussaint in his final years. The loyalty of these ladies was fierce: one of Toussaint's mistresses was arrested in June 1802 and accused of trying to assassinate General Leclerc.

Close attention has also been paid to the military dimensions of Toussaint's leadership, about which surprisingly little has been written: his relationship with his soldiers and officers (notably his lieutenants Moïse and Christophe, and his successor Dessalines), and the strategic and operational reasons for his successes on the battlefield. These questions are all the more fundamental in that he had not had any kind of exposure to war before 1791: his principal tasks during the decades he worked at the Bréda plantation were to serve as a coachman, and to look after horses and livestock. Recent scholarship has underlined the key role of African-born combatants in the revolutionary struggle, and their provision of military skills which creole slaves lacked. How Toussaint forged his links with these fighters and maintained his position of authority over them – Pamphile de Lacroix regarded this as his "greatest triumph" – is a fascinating question, not least because the *bossales* were often driven by royalist instincts which were notionally at odds with Toussaint's republican sympathies. There is also the fierce and bitter *Guerre des Couteaux* in 1799-1800, during which Toussaint benefitted from secret American aid. More generally, there is the contrast between Toussaint's frequent appeals to moderation and compassion in war, and the extent to which he was responsible for the atrocities committed throughout the revolutionary years. Finally, there is the invasion and liberation of the Spanish part of the island in 1801, which has been little studied.

On the political side of things, I devote particular attention to Toussaint's method and style of government: his charismatic authority, his practical accomplishments in such areas as road-building and education, and his inclusiveness (notably his capacity to draw upon talents from all sections of the community). Also important were his fondness for ceremonies and parades, his reliance on religion, and his willingness to appeal directly to the sense of morality and reason of the agricultural workers. His preferred method of dealing with discontent on the plantations was to ride out to the troubled locations and invite the workers to form a semi-circle around his horse and inform him directly of their grievances (the method invariably worked). At the same time, and especially in the final years of his rule, Toussaint was increasingly accused of resorting too readily to coercive force. In this context, the draconian measures to enforce discipline on the plantations, which have been likened by some historians to a restoration of slavery, will also be examined fully: all at once in terms of their overall philosophy (Toussaint used to repeat: "without work, there can be no freedom"), their economic effectiveness, and in the extent to which they encountered resistance.

For all its captivating qualities, Toussaint's epic cannot be confined to Saint Domingue. His life and legacy were part of a wider ensemble of ideas and practices which had their intellectual origins in the Enlightenment. As Nick Nesbitt has rightly noted (*Universal Emancipation*, p.154), to read Toussaint's speeches, letters, proclamations, and laws is "to grasp the startling penetration of Enlightenment moral philosophy in his every action". However Nesbitt's attempt to locate Toussaint's thought in the radically egalitarian "Spinozian" Enlightenment is far too intellectually constraining. It is also analytically problematic, as it ignores Toussaint's devout Catholicism.

Toussaint's Enlightenment philosophy was more syncretic, and he is much more convincingly viewed as one of the founding figures the "republican tradition of war", as defined by Karma Nabulsi's seminal *Traditions of War* (1999). This tradition, which was articulated philosophically in the political writings of Rousseau, powerfully shaped struggles against imperial and colonial domination in Europe and in the Americas from

the second half of the 18th century onwards. It was a tradition which was rooted in the ideal of liberty, to which Toussaint was passionately committed, as reflected in his very first public proclamation, in August 1793, in which he affirmed: "I want liberty and equality to reign in Saint Domingue". He believed freedom was a "natural right", and demonstrated his commitment to freedom throughout his political life in his intellectual independence, in his fierce preservation of his autonomy, and in his extraordinary capacity to shape events, as opposed merely to respond to them.

My biography locates Toussaint firmly in this republican realm, and indeed argues that he occupied a seminal place in this tradition, alongside such emblematic contemporaries as the Corsican *babbu* Pasquale Paoli, the Venezuelan revolutionary Francisco de Miranda, and the Polish national hero Tadeusz Kosciuszko. For all these men, the struggle for the emancipation of their peoples was intimately bound up in the fight against colonial slavement and foreign military occupation. They all shared the fundamental intuition that sovereignty resided with the people, and not with monarchs, and that education was a key prerequisite for creating a virtuous political community. At the same time, following Rousseau's model of the "lawgiver", these men believed that strong leadership was indispensable during critical moments of national struggle in order to hold and protect the sovereignty which their people were not yet in a position fully to exercise. Theirs was also a conception of power which rested not on naked coercion alone, but on intelligence and flexibility: as Toussaint once put it in one of his letters: "patience is superior to force: *doucement allé loing*".

This intellectual recontextualization of Toussaint is one of the major contributions of my biography. It makes sense of the singular qualities of his republicanism, and in particular his consistent appeals to the ideal of "brotherhood", which have been largely ignored by historians. The force of this tradition of fraternity is also illustrated by examining Toussaint's legend: the different ways in which his memory has been celebrated in modern Haiti, and in the creative imagination of poets, novelists, musicians, and artists, from William Wordsworth to Edouard Glissant. I also explore his appeal to anticolonial and antislavery movements in the Americas and Europe in the 19th century, as well as to later national liberators such as Simon Bolivar, Giuseppe Mazzini and José Marti – without forgetting modern revolutionary figures such as Vo Nguyên Giap, Fidel Castro, and Frantz Fanon.

More broadly, the recovery of this tradition helps restore the struggle for freedom in Saint Domingue to its rightful place in the wider historiography of the age of Revolutions. For long – too long – the extraordinary achievements of Toussaint's slave army, which paved the way for Haitian independence, have been overshadowed by the American and French revolutions. Indeed these two historical and intellectual landmarks have come exclusively to shape the way in which we think about modern republican freedom. This is so even as it has become acknowledged -- notably through the works of Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit -- that "non-domination" lies at the heart of this ideal of republican freedom. Yet the abolition of slavery, which is entirely grounded in the principle of non-domination, was first proclaimed in Saint Domingue in August 1793, and it was only then followed (with tepid enthusiasm) by the Convention in Paris in February 1794. Worse still, Napoleon's invasion in 1802 led to the restoration of human bondage across the French Caribbean. Slavery was finally abolished in France only in 1848, and in the USA in 1865. In respect of the revolutionary principles of equality and fraternity, it was therefore the Saint Domingue revolutionaries, led by Toussaint, who opened the way, and thus stood as the true historical incarnation of these republican ideals.

Toussaint was indeed the archetype of the republican hero. Born into one of the most unequal societies of his time, where wealth and skin colour meant everything, this son of an African slave exemplified what the promise of equality could offer for all of humanity. In an era of brutal divisions around race and class lines, he represented an uncompromising belief in the unity of humankind, and the universality of human rights. In an age when the standard-bearers of "civilization" routinely committed acts of barbaric violence against their fellow-humans, and when the flames of civil strife were deliberately fanned by competing warlords, Toussaint did his best to embody the qualities of temperance, forgiveness and compassion. Above all, his democratic integrity and his republican virtue command our respect in a setting in which leadership was typically associated with opportunism and venality.

Further Reading

Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*: *The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2004

Carolyn Fick, *The making of Haiti. The Saint-Domingue revolution from below*. Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1990.

Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed. Haiti and the cultures of slavery in the age of revolution*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004

Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Black Spartacus: The epic life of Toussaint Louverture*. London, Allen Lane, 2020

C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins. Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution* (1938), London, Penguin, 2001